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ABSTRACT

An exploratory study examined the influence of teaching conditions and instructional strategies on student reading performance in Latvia and compared influences to those in other countries. A representative sample of students was drawn from the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Reading Literacy Study in Latvia. Two age groups were examined: 9-year-old students at Grade 3 (Population A) and 14-year-old students at Grade 8 (Population B). Data consisted of reading test results and student, teacher, and school administrator questionnaires. Results indicated that (1) about half of the students were not satisfied with the treatment that they got from their teachers; (2) a positive correlation existed between achievement and class size for Population B; (3) teachers from Population A in Latvia gave a higher priority to skill aims (as did most teachers in low-achieving countries); (4) teachers from Population B in Latvia, as with most teachers for high-achieving countries, value the aims of developing students' interest in reading in combination with literature orientation; (5) encouraging students to read was the most frequently used teaching activity in Latvia; (6) no significant correlation existed between the hours of instruction in schools and student achievement; and (7) school headmasters reported that lack of student interest and insufficient class material were the most serious problems for teaching reading. Findings suggest that student reading achievement in Latvia is strongly determined by home resources, and student interest in schooling decreases from grade 3 to grade 8. (Contains 1 table and 7 figures of data.) (RS)

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Instructional Strategies in the IEA Reading Literacy Study: The Case of Latvia

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Introduction

All societies have a constant interest in how their young people are educated to live in society. The question of what literacy, and especially reading literacy, means is of importance to governments, polocy makers and society at large.

The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) is well known as for conducting studies and making international comparisons of student achievement. Results from those studies are intended for policy makers and educational practitioners. In the period 1989 to 1992 the IEA conducted a Study of Reading Literacy in 32 systems of education. in Latvia this survey was done as a national study one year after the other countries.

Aims

The purpose of this paper is to explore the influence of teaching conditions and instructional strategies on student reading performance in Latvia and to them with the same from the other countries that participated in the study. This purpose is determined by the interest in the ways in which teachers in Latvia help students acquire reading literacy experience in the classroom. The findings from this study are addressed to the educational policy makers in Latvia in order to reveal problems in the system of education and to improve teaching practices and student learning in the country.

Methodology

For the IEA study reading literacy is defined as "the ability to understand and use those written language forms required by society and/ or valued by the individual" (Elley, 1992). Reading tests and student, teacher and school questionnaire were used. Three major types of item were included in the Reading test: narrative prose, expository prose and documents.

A representative sample of students was drawn for the IEA Reading Literacy Study in Latvia. Two age groups were examined: nine-year old students at the Grade 3 (Population A) and fourteen-year old students at the Grade 8 (Population B).

This paper presents the results of an exploratory investigation of the data. SAS and SUDAAN software have been used to produce descriptive statistics, interrelations and comparisons among means for significance testing.

Results

The Teaching of Reading

"Reading is a culturally transmitted skill which normally requires explicit teaching for its development (Lundberg, 1991, p. 14)". This subchapter presents the outcomes from the IEA Reading Literacy Study about instructional strategies in Latvia are reported. The booklet *Teaching Reading Around the World* (Lundberg, Linnakylä, 1993) describes how reading is regarded in different countries. In this subchapter, whenever Latvian data are compared with those from other countries participating in the study, the information has been gained from this booklet.

Teaching conditions

Class Size. In Population A, Latvia class size on average is 19 students per class, whereas in Population B it is 17 students per class. It might be inferred that Latvia has rather small classes. However, class size in Latvia varies from 3 to 34 students per class for Grade 3 and from 4 to 36 students for Grade 8. Internationally the average number of students per calass for Population A varies from 16 in Italy to 38 in Singapore, and for Population B from 16 in Switzerland to 47 in the Philippines. No clear relationship between class size and student reading achievement was found in Latvia for Population A, although, a positive correlation achievement was found for Population B. This, however, might be because larger classes are found in city schools and so the result may be influenced by community type.

Instructional Time. In Latvia in Grade 3 the average total instructional time was 18 hours per week of which 6 hours was devoted for teaching Latvian and 3.6 hours for the teaching and practice of reading. There was a positive correlation between the time allocated to teaching reading and student achievement. Internationally the total time of instruction varies from about 26 hours per week in USA to 15 hours per week in Slovenia. The working week for Grade 8 in Latvia was 23 hours, of which almost 4 hours was devoted to general instruction in Latvian (including literature, writing etc.). Internationally the total time of instruction varies from about 31 hours per week in Italy to 14 hours per week in Thailand.

Time Teaching Class by The Same Teacher. Average time teaching this class was 1.7 years for Population A in Latvia.

Number of Textbooks Per Student. In Latvia it was discovered that there was on average one textbook for each student in class at Grade 3 and about 1.2 books at Grade 8. A positive correlation was found in Population A. Internationally the number of books varies from one book for each two students in low-scoring countries to more than two books per student in high-scoring countries.

Teacher Characteristics

Gender Differences. Only female teachers were involved in the IEA Reading Literacy Study in Latvia. Almost all Population A teachers were female compared with 87% for Population B. The predominance of female teachers was also observed in most of the other countries in the study.

Teachers' Own Reading. Teachers were asked to estimate, how often they read any kind of text from the following areas: professional reading (articles on teaching, articles on reading), expository reading (books on history, politics, the arts and science) and literature reading (stories, poems, plays, children's books or articles on literature). Teachers of Population A in Latvia seem to read each of these types of text equally often (about once a term). Teachers of Population B in Latvia read literature more often (about once a month), but other kinds of reading with the same frequency as teachers from Population A. A negative correlation between the amount that teachers read and student achievement was observed in Population B in Latvia.

Teachers' Conception of the Teaching Aims

Teachers' ratings of aims in order of importance for Population A in Latvia were collected. *Making reading enjoyable* was the least important aim in Latvia, though internationally it ranked highly. On the other hand *developing skills in reading aloud* and *developing word attack skills* was given high rank in Latvia, but low rank in other countries.

The ranked aims were divided into two main groups, one focusing on skills and the other on the encouragement and development of reading interests (Elley, 1994):

Skill aims	Encouragemental-interest aims
1. Developing skills in reading aloud	1. Developing a lasting interest in reading
2. Improving students' reading comprehension	2. Developing students' research and study skills
3. Extending students' vocabulary	3. Developing students' critical thinking
4. Improving word-attack skills	4. Expanding students' world views
5. Increasing speed of reading	5. Making reading enjoyable

The gap between these two groups of aim is rather small in Latvia; however, teachers gave a higher priority to skill aims. High-achieving countries tended to have a wider gap between the two aim groups, with a higher priority given to encouragemental-interest aims.

Teachers' ratings of aims in order of importance for Population B in Latvia were also investigated. The aims of *developing lasting interest in reading* and *improving students' reading comprehension* had the highest ranks, but the aim of *teaching students' to interpret diagrams* had the lowest rank both in Latvia and internationally.

There were four categories of the aims in the case of Population B:

Teacher-centered skill orientation	Student-centered strategy orientation
1. Improving students' reading comprehension 2. Extending students' vocabulary 3. Increasing speed of reading	1. Developing students' critical thinking 2. Expanding students' world views
Literature and interest emphasis	**Functional emphasis**
1. Developing a lasting interest in reading 2. Increasing students' appreciation of literature	1. Developing students' research and study skills 2. Expanding students' variety of reading choice 3. Teaching students to apply study strategies to other subjects 4. Teaching students to interpret diagrams and graphs

Teachers in Latvia valued the student-centered approach more highly than the teacher-centered skill approach. The literature orientation strategy was highly valued by teachers both in Latvia and internationally.

Figure 1 shows the location of the countries in the orthogonally related the two dimensions of aims. Latvia is placed in the quadrant where strategy orientation is combined with literature orientation. This is the quadrant where most of the high-achieving countries were placed.

Teachers in Latvia, and most teachers in the other countries, value the aims of developing students' interest of reading and their own strategic thinking.

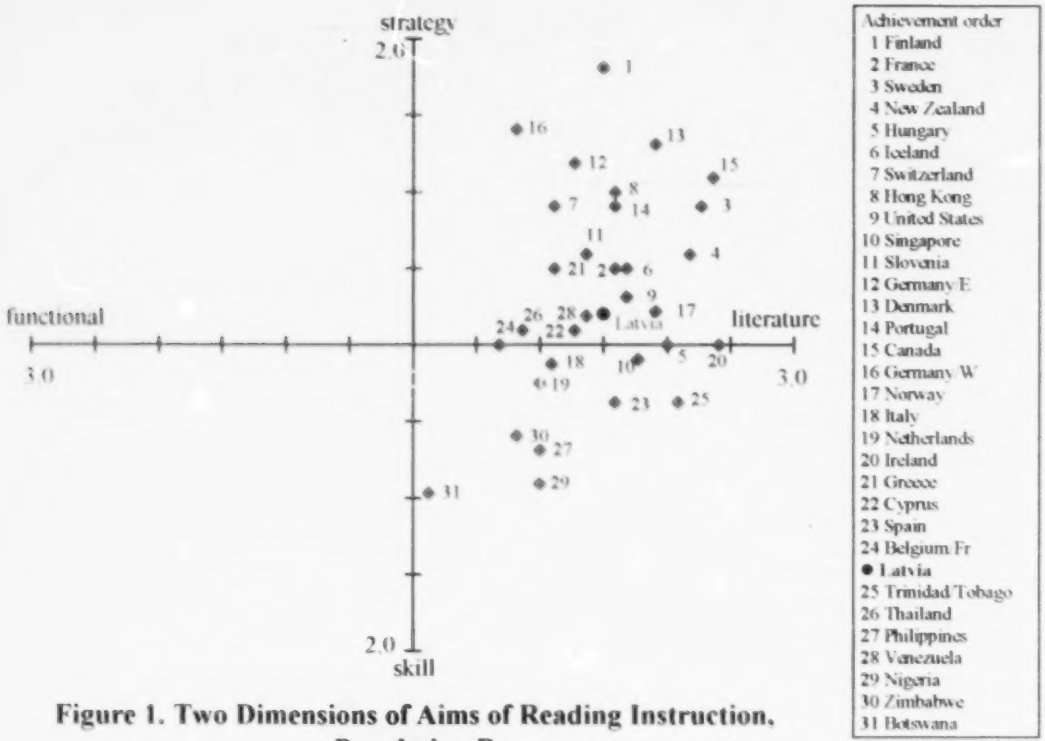

Figure 1. Two Dimensions of Aims of Reading Instruction, Population B

Source: Lundberg, Linnakylä, 1993 (adapted for Latvia)

Teaching practices

Teachers from Population A in Latvia valued highly such activities as *Looking for the theme or message*, *Listening to students reading aloud to a whole class*, *Silent reading in class* and *Orally summarizing their reading*. Only *Looking for the theme or message* was found to correlate with students' achievement in reading. Other frequently used teaching activities for nine-year-old students in Latvia did not influence their reading. The most significant positive correlation was found for: *Making predictions during reading*, *Relating experiences to reading*, *Drawing to reading*. In general, teachers in Latvia were using instructions with the emphasis on skills slightly more often than those with the emphasis on strategy. The same pattern was found when teaching aims were observed.

In Population B, however, teachers ranked highly activities like *Listening to students reading aloud*, *Silent reading in class* and *Learning new vocabulary systematically*. A slight positive correlation was found with *Relating experiences to reading* and *Student leading discussion about passage*. A negative correlation with *Reading in other subject areas* was also found. In general, teachers put more emphasis on skill and functional orientation in teaching strategy for Population B students in Latvia. The majority of countries were located in the literature-based and skill-orientated quadrant (Figure 2). Teachers in Latvia and showed a lack of correspondence between attitudes or beliefs and the instructional practices used in schools.

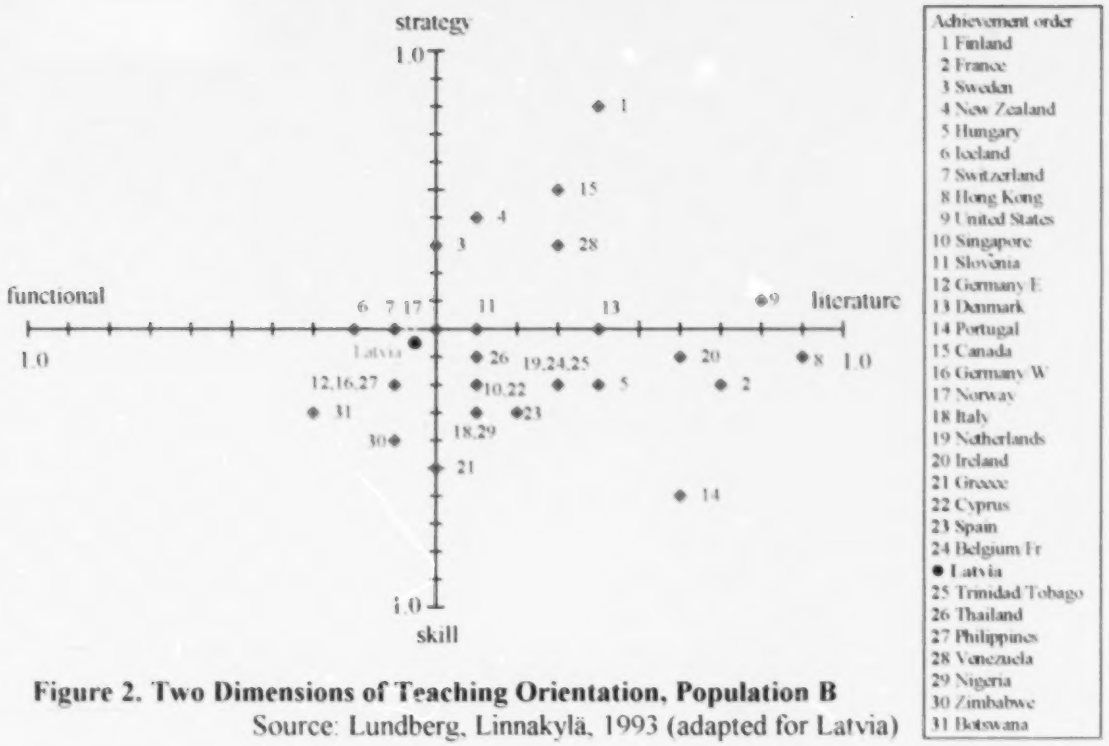

Figure 2. Two Dimensions of Teaching Orientation, Population B
Source: Lundberg, Linnakylä, 1993 (adapted for Latvia)

Teaching Strategies

Groping students for reading instruction. Teachers of Population A answered about types of grouping they used in reading instruction. The most common type of grouping used internationally was ability grouping. About 40% of Latvian teachers used grouping in their class and 69% of them used ability groups. No correlation with achievement was found in Latvia.

Time Allocation on Various Reading Domains. One of the questions in The Teacher questionnaire was how often teachers use narration, exposition and documents in their teaching strategies. They rated their answers on a 5-point scale as: almost never; 3 or 4 times a year; about once a month; at least once a week; nearly every day. Table 1 shows the average time allocated to the teaching of various text types.

Table 1. Average Time Allocated to Teaching of Various Reading Domains

		Narration	Exposition	Documents
Population A	International mean	3.5*	3.2*	2.6*
	Latvia	4.2	3.5	2.2
Population B	International mean	3.6*	3.3*	2.3*
	Latvia	3.3	3.5	2.4

*Source: Lundberg and Linnakylä (1993)

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Table 1 reveals that for Population A in Latvia narration is valued particularly highly as compared to the international mean, whereas the frequency of document teaching is low. For Population B, however, the Latvian averages correspond more or less to-the respective international scores.

As mentioned by Lundberg and Linnakylä (1993), the ratio between document teaching and narration is an indicator of the relative stress teachers place on document teaching regardless of their general frequency bias. Internationally this ratio is 0.75 in Population A and 0.64 in Population B which means that document teaching was in a somewhat stronger position in lower grades. For Latvia this ratio was 0.52 for Population A and 0.73 in Population B indicating that more attention was paid to document teaching in higher grades than in lower grades. Actually, in Latvia, this ratio rise from Population A to Population B is due to less teaching of narration rather than more frequent teaching of documents. A high correlation between the teaching of different text types and student reading achievement was found in both populations in Latvia.

Constructs on Teaching. In the Teacher Questionnaire for Population A there were more than 100 items concerning different instructional strategies. In order to make the comparisons more clear, Lundberg and Linnakylä (1993) established nine constructs on teaching. The following list shows how often teachers from Population A in Latvia used constructs on teaching mentioned above:

(5) Encouragement to read (2.8 times per week)
(9) Reading aloud to students (2.1 times per week)
(1) Comprehension instruction (1.9 times per week)
(8) Teacher-centered instruction (1.8 times per week)
(7) Student-orientated reading (1.3 times per week)
(4) Assessment of low order skills (0.8 times per week)
(3) General emphasis on assessment (0.8 times per week)
(6) Taking students' interests into account (0.7 times per week)
(2) Emphasis on phonics (0.5 times per week)

Encouraging students to read appears to be the most important element in the teaching of reading in Latvia. Reading aloud to students is recommended by reading specialists and teachers in Latvia used this practice rather often. Comprehension instruction is very similar to the Teacher-centered instruction and both of these constructs are ranked highly by low-scoring countries. Next in order are different kinds of constructs on assessment. Most West-European countries placed low emphasis on assessment. According to Lundberg and Linnakylä (1993, p. 65): "Emphasis on assessment in reading instruction might be interpreted in different ways. One possibility is that such emphasis reflects care, good planning and systematic management. Another alternative interpretation is that emphasis on assessment is typical of highly centralized educational systems where accurate records of the standardized testing are required by the Ministry of Education. A third alternative is that extensive testing reflects fragmentation and compartmentalization of the reading curriculum where subskills are emphasized rather than a more unified language arts curriculum".

Emphasis on phonics is at the bottom of the list of constructs for Population A in Latvia. However, the frequency of using this method in Latvia was rather high - about twice per month, as opposed to some other countries, where it was used only once per month. This is surprising, since most of the nine-year-olds should have been finished with basic instruction in reading. Obviously, teachers in Latvia are not satisfied with their students' phonic skills.

Figures 3 and 4 show different instructional strategies used in teaching reading in Latvia for Population A and Population B respectively. Figures 5 and 6 present the relationship between student achievement and the instructional methods used in the classroom. In Latvia for both Population A and Population B respectively, there was no difference found in reading achievement based on the method used. This pattern is similar for other instructional and assessment methods for Latvia and in other countries. There is no single "best" teaching method for reading instruction. However, the teacher in the classroom should be able to assess and find out what kind of problems each student has with his or her method of reading acquisition.

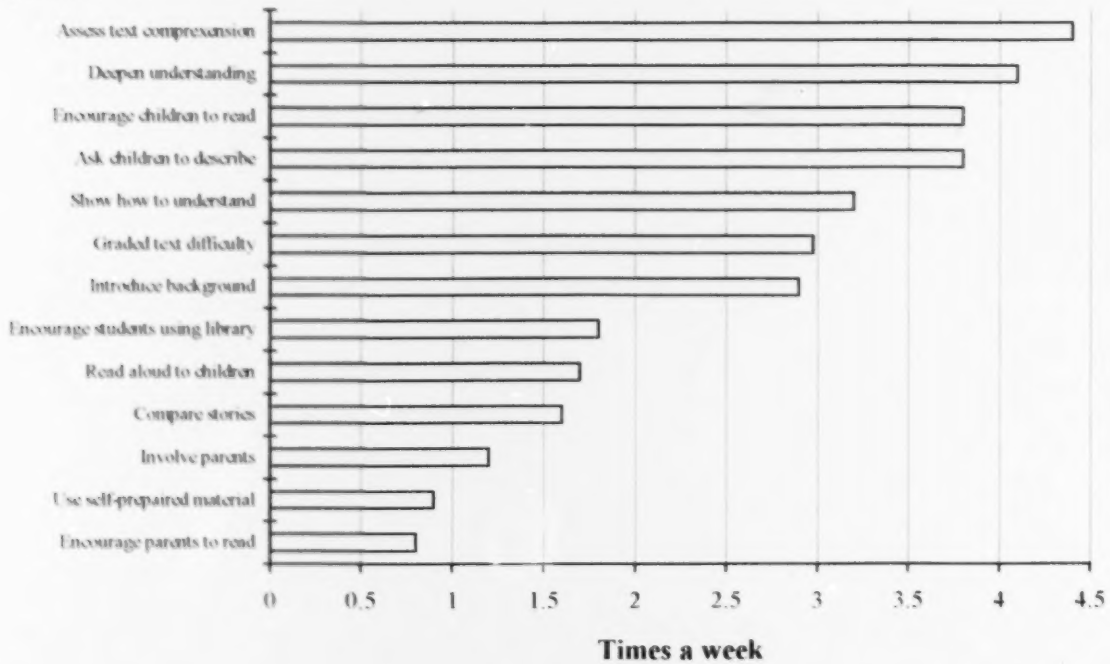

Figure 3. Frequency of Using Different Instructional Strategies, Population A, Latvia

From figure 4 it can be seen that, in order to improve reading comprehension among fourteen-year-old students in Latvia, teachers prefer to use methods like as *Think about topic* and *Remember related things*.

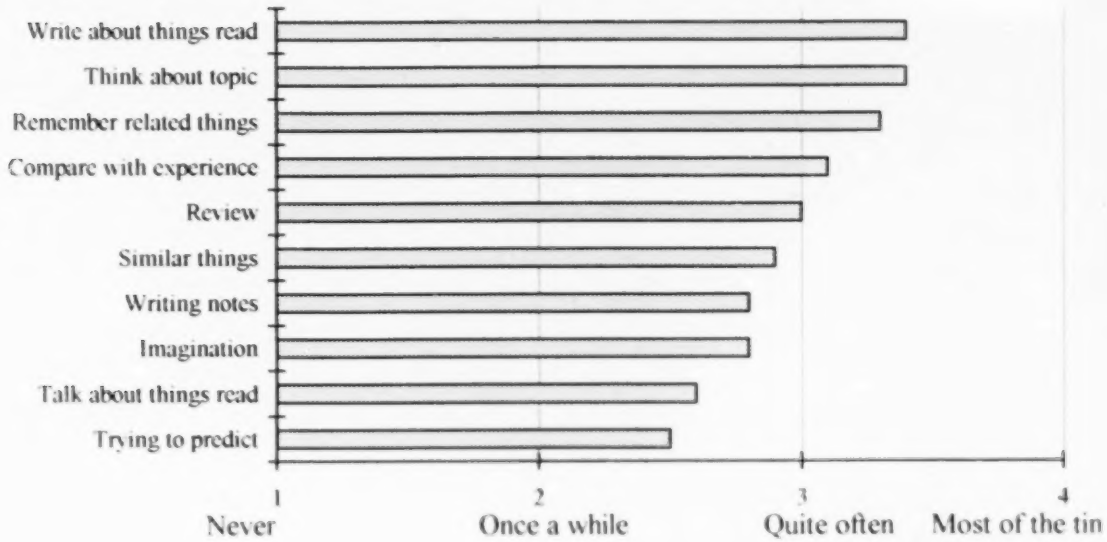

Figure 4. Frequency of Using Different Instructional Strategies, Population B, Latvia

In Population B, the assessment of reading differs from assessment in Population A in terms of purposes and therefore also in methods. The preferred assessment methods for Population B teachers from Latvia were *Oral discussions*, *Teacher quizzes* and *Discus materials read*. A reasonable assumption that frequent use of multiple-choice questions indicates assessment for accountability was given by Lundberg and Linnakylä (1993). The other methods (*Teacher quizzes, Discuss materials read, Open-ended questions, Student interest, Oral discussions and Essays about literature*) indicate assessment for instruction. Figure 7 presents between-country variation in differences between multiple-choice and other types of assessment. Latvia place a little more emphasis on assessment for instruction mostly because of a lack of material including multiple-choice questions. Low-achieving countries reported that external accountability was an important factor.

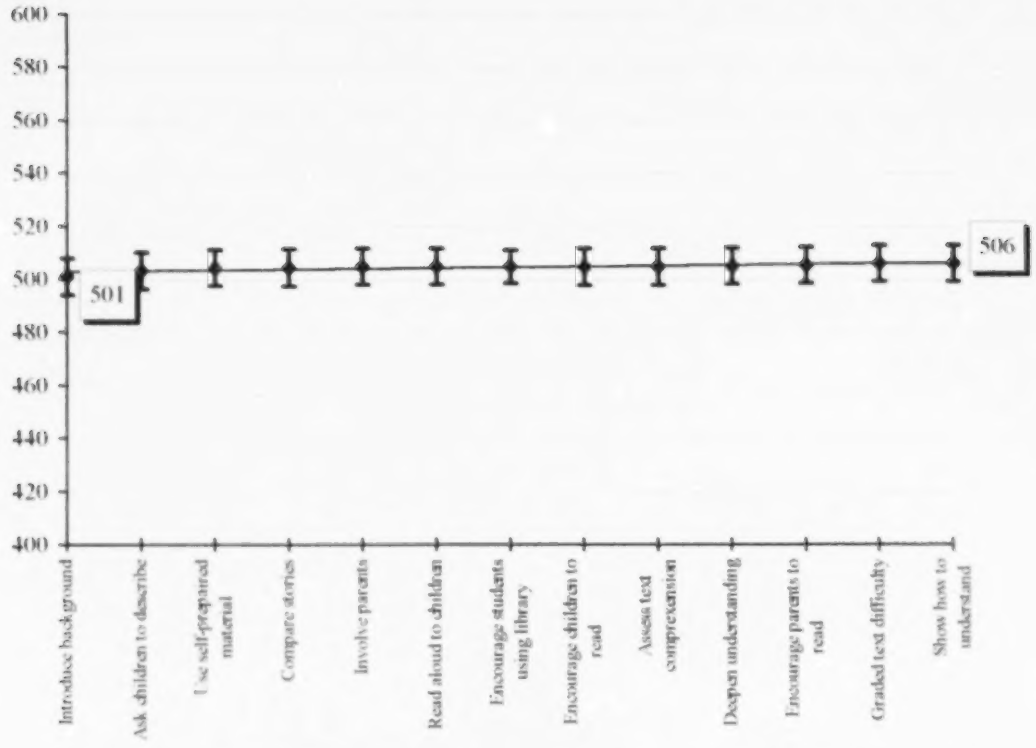

Figure 5. Relationship Between Reading Achievement and Instructional Strategies, Population A, Latvia

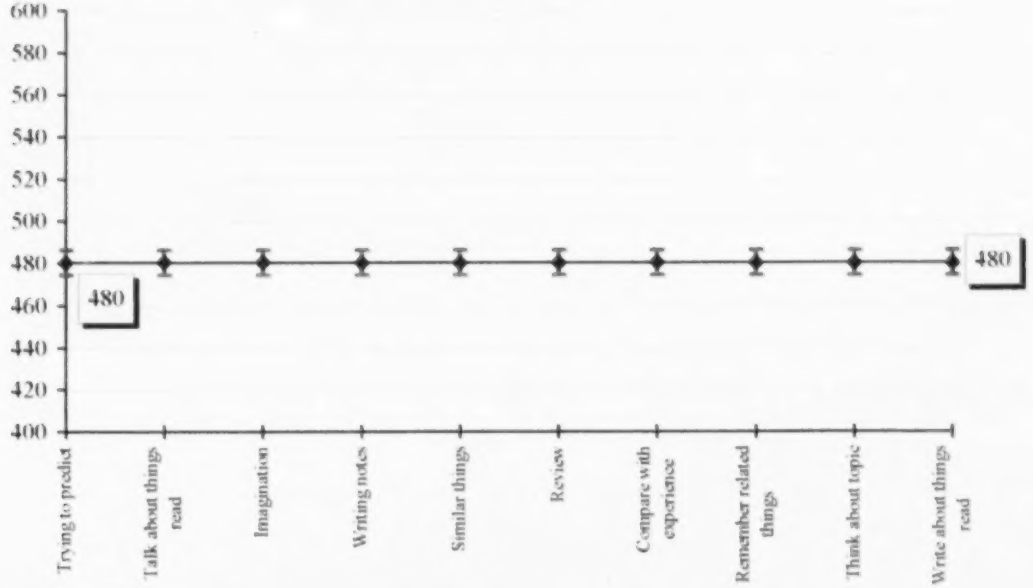

Figure 6. Relationship Between Reading Achievement and Instructional Strategies, Population B, Latvia

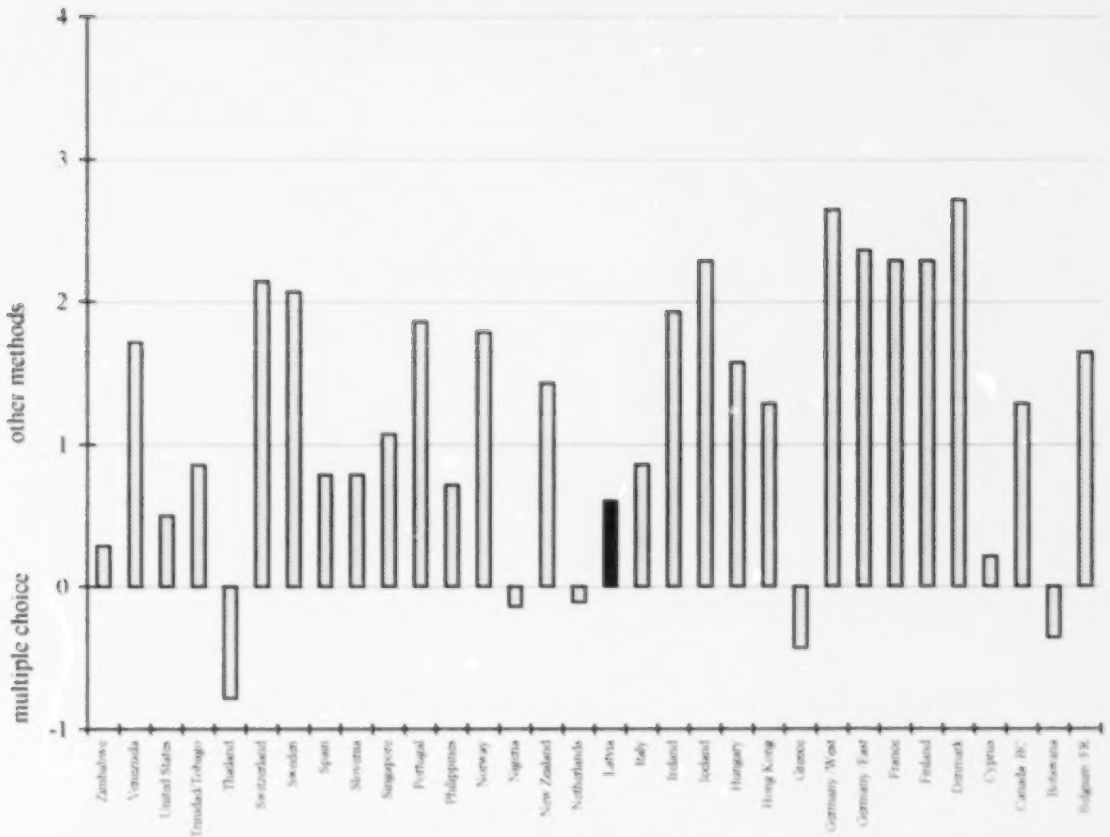

Figure 7. Between-country Variation in Differences Between two Types of Assessment in Population B

Source: Lundberg, Linnakyla, 1993 (adapted for Latvia)

The School Resources

This subchapter presents information about school resources in Latvia and in other countries. These data are from the School Questionnaire about instructional time, libraries and teachers. Most of the data mentioned in this subchapter are presented as percentages or mean values of variables. Lists of all mean values from the Comparisons mentioned in this chapter about the other countries participated in the IEA study come from the Chapter 5 of *The IEA Study of Reading Literacy: Achievement and Instruction in Thirty-Two School Systems* edited by Elley (1994).

School Community Resources. Each school principal reported whether or not public library, bookstore, secondary school and higher educational establishment were available in the community. In Latvia in average almost all schools had access to a public library, bookstore, or a secondary school locally, and higher educational establishments were usually available in a neighboring town. The correlation between reading achievement and community resources was 0.30 for Population A in Latvia. Public libraries and bookstores represent community reading

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resources. The between-country correlation with achievement for those two indicators were 0.72 and 0.57 for Population A and 0.86 and 0.82 for population B.

Another indicator of resources was the extent to which the school received parental support. For both populations in Latvia the degree of parental cooperation was reported as average. in comparison with the neighboring school. Parental support represents general community aid for the school. The international correlation between achievement and parental support was 0.33, but it was only 0.12 for Population A in Latvia.

Teachers. In almost all educational systems surveyed, about 90% of teachers had the same mother tongue as the language of instruction. In Latvia, 100% of teachers had the same mother tongue and the language of instruction for both age groups. This is also the case for Population A in Hungary and Portugal and for Population B in Denmark, Finland, Greece, Hungary and Italy.

The average number of special reading teachers in Latvia was rather low - one teacher per 443 students in Population A, but the correlation with achievement was 0.33. The average number of special teachers was low in countries like Singapore, Trinidad and Tobago, Cyprus and high in Denmark, Iceland, Sweden and Italy. The correlation with achievement was 0.17 internationally.

The pupil/ teacher ratio was 11 students per one full-time teacher in schools from each population in Latvia. This is an indicator of the wealth of schools and the more teachers per student in a country, the higher the level of achievement. This ratio varies for Population A from 12 students per one full-time teacher in Norway to 38 students per teacher in Venezuela. For Population B the pupil/ teacher ratio varies from 9 in Belgium to 37 in the Philippines. The correlation with achievement in Latvia was 0.18 for Population A, however it diminished to almost zero for Population B. Latvia had a "good" pupil/ teacher ratio, but, unfortunately it seem to have been used inefficiently, especially, at Grade 8.

Conditions of the School. General data on the conditions of the school contains information about average school size and hours of instruction. Average school size varies across the countries between 200 (in The Netherlands) and 700 (in Hong Kong) students for Population A and between 266 (in Norway) and 1833 (in Philippines) students for Population B Average school size in Latvia was 496 pupils in Grade 3 (the correlation with achievement was 0.33) and 411 pupils in Grade 8 (the correlation with achievement was 0.11). This means, that in Latvia students from bigger schools perform better. This might be explained by the fact that bigger schools had more resources available (bookstores, etc.). In general, bigger schools perform less well, since in the poorer countries school sizes were larger.

Another indicator of school conditions is number of hours per year a school was open. It varies from 585 (in Iceland) to 1017 (in Indonesia) for Population A and from 663 (in Botswana) to 1200 (in Thailand) for Population B. The average number of hours of instruction per week ranged from about 16 hr/w in Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Slovenia to more than 25 hr/w in Italy, Indonesia, the Netherlands and USA for Population A. For Population B this indicator had average values between 20 hr/w in Slovenia, Trinidad and Tobago to 30 hr/w in Italy, the Netherlands and Philippines. Internationally there was no significant relationship between the time students spent in class and achievement. In Latvia schools were open 607 (Grade 3) and 767 (Grade 8) hours per year. The average number of hours of instruction were 18 hours per

week for nine-years old students and 23 hours per week for fourteen-years old students. No significant correlation with achievement in Latvia was found.

Library resources. In general, countries with more reading resources like school and class library, reading room , number of books per student in school, class library etc. tended to achieve better in reading literacy. There was no correlation found between reading performance and the presence of reading resources in Latvian schools. This might be explained by the fact that home resources like number of books at home made more influence than reading resources in school.

School Principals' Activities. The favorite activity for principals was to *encourage teacher contacts*. School headmasters demand higher *evaluation results* from Grade 3 teachers than from Grade 8 teachers.

School principals in Latvia used to evaluate teachers work on average 1.3 times per week. Most of the principals preferred to observe or to interview their teachers. It is remarkable, that student ratings was one of the most frequently used source of information for principals from Population B.

School headmasters from Latvia reported that *Students are not interested* and *Insufficient class material* were the two most important problems for the teaching of reading. Lack of motivation among the students was more obvious in the fourteen-years old group. The insufficiency of the teaching material might be explain due to the economic reasons or due to the lack of such a material on the market.

Data on the so-called "International Option" are not reported in any of the presently published international reports. However, it is useful to take a look at Latvian students' opinions about school. Only 33% of students said that school is a place where *I feel important*. The lack of enthusiasm for such expressions as *Learning is fun* (48% of students), *I feel great* (51%), *I really like to go* (52%) show that students do not feel much interest in attending school at the age of fourteen. It might that expressions *People come to me for help* (26%), *I know that people think a lot of me* (33%), *People have confidence in me* (49%) reveal some level of indifference from their school fellows. Most alarming, however are expressions like *Teachers are fair and just* (43%), *Teachers treat me fairly in the class* (52%), *Teachers give me marks I deserve* (52%), which means that about half of the students are not satisfied with the treatment that they get from their school teachers.

Summary

It should be remembered that the data collected in the IEA Reading Literacy are limited by the student, teacher and school questionnaires. All figures and tables about Latvia are based on replies from students, teachers and school principals.

Latvian students' opinion about school was drawn from the set of items called "International Option". It shows that about half of the students are not satisfied with the treatment that they get from their school teachers.

Average class size in Latvia is about 18 pupils. A positive correlation between achievement and class size was found in Latvia for Population B. This, however, might be because larger classes are found in cities and so this might be influenced by community resources.

A predominance of female teachers was observed in schools in Latvia. A negative correlation between student achievement and the range of teachers' reading was observed in Population B.

Teachers from Population A in Latvia gave a higher priority to skill aims as did most teachers in low-achieving countries. Teachers from Population B in Latvia as with most teachers from the high-achieving countries value the aims of developing students' interest in reading in combination with literature orientation.

Some inconsistencies between teachers' attitudes or beliefs and instructional practices were found. Teachers in Latvia put more emphasis on skill and functional orientation in practice.

The question about how often teachers use narration, exposition and documents in their teaching strategies was examined. Latvian teachers paid more attention to document teaching in higher grades.

Nine basic constructs of teaching were defined. Encouraging students to read was the most frequently used teaching activity in Latvia.

Two-dimensions of assessment were analysed in Population B. Latvia placed a little more emphasis on the assessment for instruction mostly because of a lack of material including multiple-choice questions. Low-achieving countries considered that external accountability to be important.

The correlation between reading achievement and community resources (public libraries, bookstores, secondary school and higher educational establishment) was 0.30 for Population A in Latvia.

The degree of parental cooperation with the school was noted as being important for student achievement.

The pupil/ teacher ratio in Latvia was 11 students per one full-time teacher. This very good ratio could, however, be used more efficiently.

Students from bigger schools in Latvia perform better. This might be explained by the fact that bigger schools had more community resources available (bookstores, etc.).

No significant correlation between the hours of instruction in schools, and student achievement was found. There was no correlation found between reading performance and the presence of any kind of library in Latvian schools.

School headmasters from Latvia reported that *Students are not interested* and *Insufficient class material* were the two most serious problems for teaching reading.

The main findings on the IEA Reading Literacy Study in Latvia can be summarized as follows:

Student reading achievement in Latvia was strongly determined by home resources. The relatively higher results from Population A could be because nine-years old students are more controlled by their parents than fourteen-years old students. During the years of schooling students were not trained sufficiently to improve their reading performance.

On the other hand, teachers may not be capable to teach students well enough. This could be explain by several factors. First, teachers were not trained to use different teaching methods in reading. Usually, there was only one ABC and teaching method being taught. Secondly, teachers were not trained to use different assessment methods. The only criteria to determine student achievement in reading, was the number of words a student could read aloud per minute. There was no different assessment material available for teachers. Most of the evaluation of students' achievement was done for accountability rather than to improve instruction. Finally, inconsistencies between teachers' attitudes or beliefs and instructional practices prevented them from fulfilling their teaching aims.

Student interest in schooling decreased from Grade 3 to Grade 8. One of the reasons could be that students are not satisfied with the treatment that they get from their school teachers. On the other hand, some misunderstandings between teachers and school principals were also taking place. These problems might be alleviated by making changes to the school milieu.

The findings from this study are addressed to the educational policy makers in Latvia in order to point out problems in the system of education and to help improve teaching practices and student learning in the country.

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